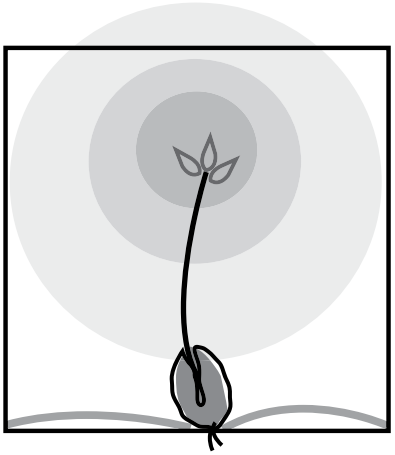

How to Cultivate Biblical, Confessional, Resilient, and Evangelistic Pastors

Mark Mattes

Up until the last forty years, the overall trajectory of North American Lutheranism, and Western Christianity as well, was growth.[1] The motto of Henry Melchior Muhlenburg, patriarch of North American Lutheranism, was "the church must be planted."[2] Many congregations had already been founded when he was called to serve them. But he established a track record for growing these faith communities. Many assume that all Lutheran immigrants were eager to join Lutheran congregations, but that is a false impression. Synodical statistics for 1920 indicate that about 30% of Norwegians belonged to a synod with a Norwegian background.[3] Only 20% of Swedish immigrants joined the Augustana Synod. And a mere 10% of Danish immigrants held membership in one of the Danish synods. While a fraction of German immigrants joined Lutheran congregations, many more became unchurched, anti-churched, or members of non-Lutheran denominations.

Lutheran missionaries to North American immigrants could effectively use ethnicity and language as natural draws. In an unfamiliar land, newcomers were attracted to the synods in geographical areas where their mother tongues were spoken. But to repeat: not all immigrants from historically Lutheran lands were eager to join Lutheran congregations, for whatever reasons. Those who did join did so because they were actively courted, evangelized, and welcomed into such fellowships. Pastors who wanted to build congregations reached out to them. Some immigrants rejected that welcome, but others embraced it wholeheartedly. Thereby congregations grew.

Nor should we assume that Lutheran churches grew because there were higher birth rates in the past. No doubt there were higher birth rates, especially in rural communities, with big farms and relatively stable families. Those baptized in infancy generally remained loyal to the church. But that was also because families, the community, and the church expected children and youth to be loyal. Nineteenth-century pastors did not encourage youth to experiment with various types of spirituality, "belief systems," or even other branches of Christianity to help them see what would be "right for them." Instead, they admonished those under their care to remain loyal because they regarded Lutheran insights as offering a distinctive approach to Christian faith and life, a reliable hope and consolation that other religious messages do not offer. They regarded it as offering the truth that would set people free.

That is not to say that Lutheran pastors of an earlier era all assumed that there was no truth whatsoever in other Christian traditions. But they were adamant that truth with its greatest clarity was to be had in Lutheranism. Truth is something that any person of integrity will not want to betray. Which raises the question: just how many of today's mainline clergy believe that they deal with *truth*? Undoubtedly, many clergy feel that they offer *a* truth—a perspective that may lead to better living and a better world—but not *the* truth. The latter would be perceived as too judgmental, narrow, and intolerant.

While it is no guarantee that churches that claim and affirm truth will grow, it is a guarantee that churches that fail to affirm that Christ is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6) will stagnate and die.[4]

Two Reasons for Historic Growth

With the advance of threshing equipment by the 1890s, birth rates dropped because it was no longer necessary for farm families to be so large. But Lutheran synods continued to grow, especially in the cities and eventually in the suburbs in the early 1950s. The Iowa Synod, for instance, began in 1854 with about fifty souls. When it merged into the American Lutheran Church in 1930, it had grown to about 212,000 baptized members.[5] In honor of the seventy-fifth anniversary of that particular synod, G. J. Zeilinger wrote that "only occasionally were men sent out for the express purpose of doing home mission work. But *every pastor considered himself a missionary* and looked for missionary opportunities in the territory where God had placed him."[6]

For many Lutheran synods, such growth happened in spite of the fact that there was continuous migration out of rural areas, where most Lutheran congregations had been established, to the cities. There were two reasons for the church's continuing growth.

First, as mentioned, prior to the 1960s Lutherans were convinced of the truth of their tradition. In the 1970s, when the editor of the Lutheran Church in America publication *The Lutheran* was asked if Lutheranism was the truth, he responded "yes," but then cautiously added, "but we aren't the only ones who have it."[7] The latter qualification was prudent in a religiously pluralistic North American environment. But what shouts louder and is more unique in our day is the editor's unhesitating answer that Lutherans do have the truth. In today's ELCA we find greater reservations about affirming that Lutherans or even Christians have the truth. As an Upper Midwest pastor put it to me once, "Christianity is about being nice. I am a pastor because I believe in being nice and a congregation is a good environment to promote niceness." For this pastor, the Christian faith is not grounded in doctrinal truth necessary for salvation but in charitable acts of kindness and that alone. Jesus was the nicest of men, we are to infer, and we Christians who need pious role models should be like him. As a quip on a now-retired seminary professor's office door facetiously put it: "God's nice, we're nice, isn't that nice?" But if faith comes down to being nice, then why would we need the church when we have fine organizations and clubs like the Lions, Rotary, or Scouts? In fact, they probably do it better.

By contrast, if you believe your tradition is true or about the truth, you will have a zeal to commend it to others. Lutheranism's suspicion of self-righteousness lurking in all people should tip us off that "niceness" itself can be an expression of self-righteousness. But if the gospel is true, it isn't that God is opposed just to our sin. God is also opposed to anything we would use to accrue merit, including our best efforts—our niceness. If niceness could afford merit before God, then Jesus Christ would not be necessary. Or, as St. Paul put it, "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose" (Galatians 2:21). What counts before God is not niceness but a "contrite heart" (Psalm 51:17).

We should keep in mind that the majority of our theological ancestors, such as Charles Porterfield Krauth, William Passavant, Henry Eyster Jacobs, Wilhelm Loehe, Mathias Loy, Hans Gerhard Stub, Ulrik V. Koren, and Conrad Emil Lindberg were well aware of the Enlightenment critiques of Christian faith and truth claims that led in many ways to the rise of mainline Christianity. They knew these charges—and rejected them. They could reject them because they could relativize them. They knew that reason was not to be reduced to rationality per se, as if rationality were perfectly objective and free from cultural or personal bias.[8] That view was simply Enlightenment dogma straining to eliminate mystery and miracle from the cosmos. Lutheran theologians challenged such assumptions and adhered to their historic truth claims, and that had a way of gripping the mind and imagination of laypeople and future pastors.

For builder-pastors, sharing the faith is not a shameful act of cultural insensitivity but a mandate from Christ.

To return to the reasons for growth: the second reason is that Lutherans of old had a percentage of pastors on their clergy rosters who were builders, not of buildings but of congregations. Obviously not all pastors are builders by disposition. The word "pastor" means shepherd, and shepherds care for the flock. For Lutherans, this care means truthfully preaching the word of God, administering the sacraments and the office of the keys, admonishing the erring, comforting the bereaved and distressed, teaching the Scriptures, and urging godly living. This is all certainly building up the body of Christ.

But throughout much of Lutheranism's history there have also been a goodly number of shepherds who had the skills and obedient wills to increase membership and involvement in congregational life. Ask laypeople about a pastor in their congregation's history who was a standout, and a name will quickly arise of a pastor who was a builder. Some congregations were fortunate to have had two or three such pastors.

Builder-pastors exhibit distinctive character traits. They are unafraid of the unchurched and eager to engage them. They limit time in their offices, and like neighborhood police officers they find various ways to get to know their beat. They see stressful situations as opportunities for both personal and congregational growth. And most importantly they want to win people for Christ and ground them in a faith commitment.

In other words, builder-pastors have the gospel at the ready on their lips. They find ways to speak God's Word to the unchurched, teach them the faith, and walk with them on the road to baptism and Christian fellowship. For builders, sharing the faith is not a shameful act of cultural insensitivity but a mandate from Christ. They refuse to let fear of rejection govern their witness, they quickly shake the dust from their sandals if rebuffed, and they proceed to find the next person to speak to. Builders are not only biblical and confessional but also resilient and evangelistic. The congregations in the ELCA today that are growing tend to have pastoral leadership that exhibits these traits.

Builders vs. Caretakers

Far from being builders, many if not most contemporary mainline Protestant clergy would highlight their chief

pastoral strength as caregiving, a variant on the theme of therapy. Some offer an "office-based" ministry that awaits members needing therapy to come in for counseling or advice.[9] These pastors preach a message that centers on self-affirmation or advocates justice for oppressed peoples. The chief virtue in a sermon is not offending anyone, except maybe the designated oppressors. This approach is by and large endorsed by our educational systems, social service agencies, and even businesses, and it is certainly present in our seminaries.

Many of these goals are praiseworthy and noble and should indeed be endorsed. But are mainline Protestants doing anything unique, something that no other vocation or profession could do in their place? Do they have a distinctive message—and is it something that only the church can offer? The truth is that such pastors tend to lack any gripping message in their preaching and teaching, don't know how to distinguish between law and gospel, lack zeal for communicating Jesus Christ as Lord, and so fail to hook youth or the unchurched into considering the value of the Christian faith. We may well ask whether they really regard God's word as a living word, a sharp two-edged sword, which creates what it declares (Hebrews 4:12).

For some time now, seminary education has been focused on developing leaders. But if the kind of people attracted to seminary are inclined toward the therapeutic model of ministry, attempts to make leaders of them will fail. Such candidates are psychologically disinclined to take risks or take the heat for tough decisions. Instead they will prefer a safer, more comfortable environment where they can care for others and anticipate being cared for by others.

It's hard to imagine pastors like this serving as exorcists—a major component of the apostolic ministry, if the New Testament is anything to go by—when called upon to do so. And for all the talk of prophetic ministry we rarely if ever encounter a real prophet naming evil at great risk to self and reputation, like Nathan naming the sin of King David to his face.

Worse still, a few understand the role of leader to be someone who orders others around. Thus students emerge with the idea that the pastor is a functional CEO who hands out directives. Perhaps such seminarians could be set straight if they would consider instead the military, where leadership is not about barking out commands but setting the example of how to do something by being willing to do it oneself.

In contrast to the caretaking model, builders tend to have an outwardly focused vision, can work with a staff, prioritize outreach rather than office time, preach law and gospel, direct people to new life in Christ, and preach sermons that are winsome, pointed, and evangelical. Their work evokes the interest of youth, "seekers," and the unchurched. Builders are not afraid of the unchurched but are excited about outreach. Nor are they averse to giving care, but they do so within the context of outreach and evangelism. They regard pastoral encounters as opportunities to deliver the gospel in the face of the law's alien, killing work.

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Builders not only prioritize outreach; they also highlight education, and their congregations generally offer different levels of education. "What Lutherans Believe" or "What the Scriptures Teach" is the bedrock of their educational programs, for both the unchurched and those churched folks who want a review, along with Bible studies and other classes designed to help people to deepen their understanding of the faith. They bring the gospel to those who have never heard it and to those who desperately need to hear it again.

Builders are rare on clergy rosters these days. And to be fair, there has never been a time when builders were the majority. We should not assume that pastors who are not builders are failing or poor at their jobs. Ultimately, the test of ministry is not increased numbers but faithfulness to ordination vows.

Over the last four decades, though, fewer and fewer builders have been attracted to ministry. At the same time there have been fewer social expectations to attend church, the family has fragmented in numerous ways, and tremendous stress has been put on families through extended hours for work each week, not to mention academic, athletic, and musical expectations for children.

In times past, ordained ministry also would have been seen as a step toward upward social mobility. The Holy Spirit can use multiple motives in ministry, including the drive to personal fulfillment as much as the desire to share the saving Word. But a tipping point arose where the number of builders entering ministry became so scarce that it was guaranteed that the church would decline, and decline dramatically.

Unless a percentage of the clergy are builders, it simply is not possible for the church as a whole to grow. Builders have the character traits to serve small, medium, and large congregations, whatever problems they find there. Builders keep busy visiting, teaching, and evangelizing. When historically large congregations call only non-builders to serve as their senior pastors, the vibrancy and health of those congregations are put in jeopardy.

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What accounts for the tapering off of the zeal that our ancestors in the faith had? No doubt white flight from the cities to the suburbs, beginning in the 1950s, brought many central city congregations into decline. Likewise the farm crisis of the early 1980s hurt many rural and small town congregations. Reactions against the historic episcopate early in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries along with the disputes about sexuality and scriptural authority in 2009 resulted in up to one thousand congregations leaving the ELCA.

But more than anything what hurt the ELCA and its predecessor bodies was their eagerness to become more like mainline Protestants, embracing a more secular approach to faith. "Secular" here means that faith is construed as a private matter geared toward self-fulfillment, unfettered from biblical, creedal, or confessional truth claims. A secular approach to faith is apt to see the assertion that salvation is found in Christ alone as intolerance. Secularism highlights not passion to reach the unchurched with the saving gospel but accommodation to various social agendas outside the centrality of Jesus Christ. It confuses the ultimate with the penultimate.

The fact that Christians believe that they have the truth does not automatically mean that they will harass those whom they believe not to have it. It is clear from Romans 1 that all humans know something of the truth, particularly God's law, or God would not be able to hold humankind accountable. Confessing truth, Christians also endeavor to speak the truth charitably, "in love" (Ephesians 4:15), realizing that only God the Holy Spirit is ultimately in charge of and able to judge anyone's salvation.

In contrast, secular approaches to faith tend to substitute a political theology that focuses on human liberation in place of salvation as deliverance from sin, death, and the devil by Jesus Christ alone. In the process, Christ's redemption of human beings is eclipsed by the need to advocate for the oppressed. This is not to deny that victims need advocacy! But it is no advantage to advocate for them

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at the expense of the gospel that will quicken and empower them.

To be clear: orthodox Christian faith need not and should not automatically translate into conservative politics, any more than it should automatically translate into liberal politics. The political right often highlights individuals as self-owners, in contrast to Paul's "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). Orthodox confessors of the faith will defend the life of

This does not devalue God's left hand or the humanitarian quest for justice.

the unborn and urge that sexual relations be within marriage, and they will also oppose blind, uncritical patriotism and unbridled greed in a free market economy that tolerates or even creates extreme economic inequities.[10] Christ is Lord over all, thus no earthly or economic empire is Lord, even the American.[11]

Instead of adopting a party platform wholesale, Christians need to test any given ethical or political matter—whether it is abortion, same-sex marriage, or economics—on a case-by-case basis, in the light of the Scriptures and the Confessions, striving to understand the complexities attendant on all such matters. Christians do not approach the world first of all from within a moral matrix of either the right or the left but instead inhabit the world as unfolded through the story of Scripture.[12] As George Lindbeck put it, "It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text."[13]

To be sure, in any given election year, Christians can offer good reasons to vote on either side of the aisle.[14] Often we vote for the lesser evil because the greater good is not to be had. But Christians desperately need the skills to step outside the moral matrix of either the political left or political right instead of baptizing one ideology over the other. After all, political ideologies are all too often ways of salvation in disguise.[15]

The primary focus of the church should be on right-hand matters, the power of the gospel breaking into this world of sin and death to kindle new life, not left-hand matters of politics. This does *not* devalue God's left hand or the humanitarian quest for justice. Quite the contrary, it is active trust that God's people will seek to live ethically and serve their neighbors, especially the disadvantaged, as their lives are reshaped by the gospel.[16]

In this light, advocacy, when appropriate, is to be done within political venues and specific advocacy groups, not synodical or churchwide structures. It should arise organically as the Spirit brings faith when and where the Spirit wills, and how the Spirit wills.

Nor does this stand validate the falsehood that the gospel is somehow a private matter in distinction to justice as a public matter. Rather, as Steve

Paulson rightly notes, "in justification God is going public about God's real identity, and what is being done with creatures."[17] It is odd that leaders who would flinch at the thought of converting someone to Jesus have no trouble trying to convert someone to politically correct views on all sorts of cultural issues because, unlike the gospel, it does not require the death of the old sinner but only suggests a retrieval of one's better angels.

Unlike confessing the creed, the question of how to establish justice in any given situation in a democracy is open to debate, particularly over the means and what compromises might be required in a democracy.[18] Democracy has a hard time endorsing an all-or-nothing, let alone a winner-takes-all, strategy of either the extreme left or extreme right. Rather it is premised on *dis*agreement regarding how to identify and rectify injustices. Churches, by contrast, seek to structure themselves around common confession of ultimate matters of faith as specified in the Scripture, creeds, and confessions, and commend laypeople to work for justice, as they see fit, in the wider public.

The Mainline's Leftward Drift

Many of our spiritual ancestors in the American church, such as J. Michael Reu, urged that Lutherans not move in the directions of "mainline Protestants."[19] But despite the outstanding theological efforts undertaken by a host of teachers from George Forell to William Lazareth, whose work was grounded in the Scriptures and Confessions,[20] a new breed in synodical bureaucracies, colleges, and seminaries arose, starting in the 1950s, who felt that becoming like mainline Protestants and adopting their ecumenical and political agendas would be the wave of the future.[21]

We can't fault them for their good intentions, at least. How were they to know that the decisions they made would undermine the mission of the church? No doubt many church leaders felt the need to acknowledge various social pressures arising from the quest for racial and sexual equality in a culture in transition, not to mention the assault on the environment and the plight of oppressed peoples throughout the world. It is right and good that they courageously sought to address such inequities along with the deep insecurity caused by the Cold War. We are indebted to their efforts.

But the same people were also driven by a desire to help Lutherans fit into the wider American agenda, no longer sitting at the margins of American culture. Both theological liberalism and the political left appeared to be the progressive, caring way to go, and so over many years the predecessor church bodies of the ELCA moved in that direction. In this case, our leaders can be faulted for their failure to commend the Lutheran faith as offering something distinctive, even nonnegotiable, to the changing face of the North American religious landscape.

Just as both major political parties have purified themselves of dissenting or moderate voices, so too the church.

In practice, the tendency of the ELCA and its predecessor bodies was to adopt the ideologies of theological liberalism, focused on human liberation, and the political left, focused on greater personal liberties from the state, especially in sexual ethics, but tighter control of economics by the state. Mainline Protestants have sought to establish social justice by means of their churchwide bureaucracies guided by a left-of-center stance. In so doing, they have alienated members who do not share the same vision of justice, creating deep divisions and undermining loyalty.

Moreover, for many mainliners a stigma has come to be attached to theological conservativism because of an assumption that theological conservatives must also and inevitably be political conservatives. While statistically that is often the case, the link is not guaranteed. Christians seeking to be ethically faithful will find themselves in a mix-and-match approach with respect to political ideologies. An orthodox approach to faith must challenge idols erected by either the political left or the political right. We are in, not of, this world (John 17:16).

The result on the ground is that when positions at the churchwide office in Chicago or in college theology departments and seminaries have became available, theological conservatives have been and continue to be overlooked, if not outright shunned. Those who won the jobs have tended to redirect the message of the church to this-worldly matters at the expense of the life to come; to adopt Bonhoeffer's terminology, they have pursued penultimate matters at the expense of ultimate matters, advocating for justice but not proclaiming the one way to eternal life. Pastors and laity on the conservative end of the theological spectrum have found no voice to represent them at the churchwide or synodical levels or in colleges and seminaries. Just as both major political parties have purified themselves of dissenting or moderate voices, so too the church.[22] Theological conservatives are thus left with little obvious reason to remain loyal to the ELCA. When opportunities have arisen to leave, such as with the formation of Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ or the North American Lutheran Church, many have done so.

The irony is that the theological left's desire to modify existing structures in order to eliminate systemic evils unintentionally undermines the motivation to invest in those systems.[23] For example, the ELCA designed its selection of leadership at the top based not on who had a track record

of building or advancing the growth of the church but on quotas. The assumption was that putting minorities in leadership would attract a growing support base of the marginalized or under-represented within local congregations. While again the intention was honorable, the practical result was that the ELCA has had an insufficient number of leaders with a track record of advancing the life of the church by a successful practice of ministry.

And statistics show that this strategy has had no impact whatsoever on increasing the racial diversity of the ELCA. A *smaller* proportion of people for whom the quotas were instituted is active in the church today than when the ELCA was formed. In short, quotas do not increase denominational or congregational diversity. The only way to increase the percentage of minorities in the ELCA is through evangelism on the congregational, not churchwide, level by evangelists who want to reach out not because a person fits in some desirable category but because the evangelists desire to share the gospel with anyone who will listen and respond.

The upshot of all of this is that the job of the denominational headquarters should be to serve congregations and their mission, not to be a bureaucracy whose job is to blow the whistle on the injustices of other bureaucracies. Nor is public or legal justice to be seen as the only urgent matter of concern. Social investment to support stable families, the protection of the unborn and life at every stage, and the freedom to practice faith are also crucial matters for Christians in public life. All too often the ELCA's calls for justice come across as partisan. Rather than paying lip service to welcome and inclusion while in practice alienating large swaths of the population, the ELCA needs urgently to refocus its identity on the gospel that saves all people, regardless of their unique political or social identities, while educating and then trusting the laity to advocate for ethical causes as a result of their internalization of the faith in appropriate political and social outlets. In short, we need to ask more of our people—expecting them to know their faith deeply, share it, and act on it.

Theological Disengagement

Accompanying all these other problems is the catastrophic lost of interest in theology from top to bottom, from institutions to individual clergy.

Disengagement from theology can be discerned by the disappearance of historic journals and the decrease in subscriptions to one-time thriving journals such as *Dialog*. This cannot be explained merely by the notion that clergy read theological material online now. Some blame can fairly be apportioned to the irrelevance of much so-called theology to parish ministry, as in the arcane philosophical and linguistic debates in the American Academy of Religion or the Society of Biblical Literature.[24]

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But this is a two-way street. Fewer candidates for ministry express an interest in theology, let alone a set of theological convictions advocated by a journal or other organization of theological concern. It's hard to imagine that today a conference sponsored by three theological journals would have enough gravity to pull one thousand Lutherans in, as happened in the late 80s and early 90s at the behest of *Dialog*, *Lutheran Quarterly*, and *Lutheran Forum*.

Likewise, the secularism of the mainline churches that began in ELCA college religion departments, starting already in the 1960s, did much to harm the passion for theology. Prior to the entrenchment of secular truisms like "every religion is a path to salvation" or "Jesus was merely a great teacher, not a savior," Lutheran colleges served as pipelines to the seminaries. Up through the 1950s a score of students graduating from Gettysburg College enrolled each and every year at Gettysburg Seminary. At Luther Seminary in the early 1980s the majority of students came from the one ELCA Concordia in Moorhead, Minnesota, with St. Olaf in second place and the University of Minnesota in third. Another lost pipeline is that of campus ministries at non-Lutheran schools, which the ELCA has all but abandoned. Many of these campus ministries were strong feeders into parish ministry, not to mention keeping young people called to other vocations active in the congregational life of the church.

The educational mission of the church should be always catechetical, that is, to enculture its members more and more into the faith. It is the faith that gives congregational members joy and inspires them to share it. Speaking from a purely secular perspective, sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark note, on the basis of their rational choice theory of religion,

> An individual's positive experience in a worship service increases to the degree that the church is full, members enthusiastically participate (everyone sings and recites prayers, for example), and others express their positive evaluations of what is going on. Thus, as each indi-

vidual member pays the cost of high levels of commitment, each benefits from the higher average level of participation thereby generated by the group. In similar fashion, people will value the otherworldly rewards of religion more highly to the extent that those around them do so."[25]

Biblical, Confessional, Resilient, and Evangelistic

If we are to raise up more candidates for ministry who can start congregations, grow congregations, and serve large congregations, we need more candidates who have the potential to build.[26] This is not just theoretical or ideal but urgent: over the next several years, a large number of ELCA clergy will retire and so there will be a need for younger pastors. We need to scout them out and support them with prayer, mentoring, and scholarships. We need to ground them in thorough knowledge of the Scriptures and the Confessions.[27]

One difficulty is that ministeral candidates no longer arrive immersed in the language of Scripture as they once did, though too many professors of the Bible still teach as though their main task was to disabuse their students of rigid fundamentalism. Seminarians need to learn to see not just matters "behind the text" (to use Paul Ricoeur's terms) such as authorship and redaction but also "in front of the text"—how human life changes in light of the text—and "within the text"—the symbols and themes echoed throughout the Scriptures.[28] All too often the frontloading of historical-critical method has led to an unwarranted skepticism about the Bible that does not serve the church well. More helpful for our current situation is Brevard Childs's "canonical" approach to criticism honoring the integrity of the Scriptures as we have received them.[29]

The pastoral candidates we need will be biblical, confessional, resilient, and evangelistic. They will be *biblical* in that they will love the Scriptures and seek to share them with others as one shares a good friend. They will interpret the world through the lens of Scripture and not vice versa. They will find empowerment for ministry by praying the Psalter, facing disappointment by means of Ecclesiastes and Job, receiving spiritual quickening from Paul's letters, seeing their mission as belonging to the history of Israel and the church, and anchoring discipleship in the gospels.

They will be *confessional* in that they will honor the Lutheran Confessions as faithful expositions of the word of God. They will understand the doctrine of justification as the article by which the church stands or falls and will thus seek to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. They will honor the sacraments as means of grace and commend God-honoring liturgical worship. They will be leaders of faith and models of obedience as the Spirit works faith (Augsburg Confession V) and a new obedience (Augsburg Confession VI).

They will be *resilient*. In the face of stress and opposition they will neither flee nor fight back with abuse but instead, as Paul teaches, they will bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things (I Corinthians 13). They will know that God works through the bad as well as the good and so seek to find a blessing not only for themselves but also for the others with whom they are in conflict.

Finally, they will be *evangelistic*. They will have a passion to share the name that is above every name, the name at which every knee will bow and every tongue confess the lordship of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2). Christ's suffering and death have reconciled them to God, assuring them and enabling them to assure others that their lives have meaning, worth, and hope.

Two decades ago Episcopal lay theologian Thomas Reeves noted that "Christianity in modern America is, in large part, innocuous. It tends to be easy, upbeat, convenient, and compatible. It does not require self-sacrifice, discipline, humility, an otherworldly outlook, a zeal for souls, fear as well as love of God. There is little guilt and no punishment, and the payoff in heaven is virtually certain."[30] A renewed vision of Lutheran faith will refuse to allow the secular mindset to establish the agenda for the church. The gospel as we have received it from the apostles and mediated through the reformers can still speak to people today if only we give voice to it. This is especially so in a world characterized by anomie or lack of purpose, where people demand to have their rights acknowledged but refuse to confess their own sin and amend their wrongdoings, where people insist on their own individualistic self-expression but then ironically conform to others' expectations.

To spread this good news, we need to build up and support, financially and emotionally, a cadre of evangelists—not just caregivers but risktakers. For almost two decades the ELCA has touted leadership as the guide to understand true ministry. But that is not enough. All builders are leaders, but not all leaders are builders. It is builders that the church needs today. We need to begin to challenge our bright and devout youth: will you be a builder? We need to provide avenues for theological development and ways to inspire their imaginations for being a pastor in the next decades. We need to put them into positions of apprentice-building and give them a voice in the local church. And we need to promise them: you will have my support. LF

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Notes

1. For a table of Lutheran membership growth in the nineteenth century from 25,000

members to 2,175,000 members, and in the twentieth century from 2,175,000 to 7,705,000, see Mark Granquist, *Lutherans in America: A New History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 115 and 203 respectively. For tables detailing dramatic losses in the ELCA, see Mark Granquist, "The ELCA by the Numbers," *Lutheran Forum* 50/3 (2016): 17–21.

2. Theodore Tappert, "The Church Must be Planted," *Lutheran Quarterly* 12 (1998): 181–4.

3. These statistics are from Mark Granquist, email correspondence, January 20, 2017.

4. Mark Granquist notes that beginning in the late 1960s "some Lutherans had come to the conclusion that it was not appropriate to attempt to make new Christians" in an increasingly pluralistic America, with its huge variety of different religious groups. See "Exploding the Myth of the Boat," *Lutheran Forum* 44/4 (2010): 15–17.

5. Fred W. Meuser, *The Formation of the American Lutheran Church* (Columbus: Wartburg, 1958), 27, fig. 10.

6. *A Missionary Synod with a Mission: A Memoir for the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Iowa and Other States* (Chicago: Wartburg, 1929), 48.

7. Leo Rosten, *Religions of America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975), 165.

8. In part, this critique of the Enlightenment was due to the pioneering work of Johann Georg Hamann. See Oswald Bayer, *A Contemporary in Dissent: Johann Georg Hamann as a Radical Enlightener*, trans. Roy Harrisville and Mark Mattes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

9. See Mary Jane Haemig, "Coming In or Going Out?" *Dialog* 53/4 (2014): 312–18.

10 According to Oxfam International, eight individual people own as much as the poorest half of the world's population, which amounts to 3.6 billion people. <www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2017-01-16/just-8-men-own-same-wealth-half-world> (this and all subsequent websites accessed July 15, 2017). That Luther opposed nascent capitalism is well-known. "In the end, Luther considered early capitalism to constitute a *status confessionis* (a condition requiring a particular confessing of Christian faith) for the church, in spite of the fact that many of his contemporaries began to think he was tilting at windmills." Carter Lindberg, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 114.

11. As the world grows increasingly secular, the Lutheran "two kingdoms" doctrine must, at some level, be expanded in order to appropriate the ancient church's teaching that Christians are "resident aliens." The reader is commended to seek out the early church writing *Letter to Diognetus* 5.1–10.

12. The language of "matrix" is taken from Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (London: Penguin, 2012), 319–66. Haidt seeks ways for conservatives and liberals to find a common ground in public discourse, surely a praiseworthy endeavor in today's politically charged environment. He argues that both sides have insights necessary for social health that the other side lacks.

13. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 118.

14. See J. Michael Reu and Paul Henry Buehring, *Christian Ethics* (Columbus: Lutheran Book Concern, 1935), 378, for insightful commentary on economic matters and secularism.

15. See Robert H. Nelson, *Economics as Religion from Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 101–13.

16. Robert Benne defends the need to protect "the radicality and universality of the gospel" in *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 120.

17. Steve Paulson, "The Augustinian Imperfection," in *The Gospel of Justification in Christ: Where Does the Church Stand Today?* ed. Wayne Stumme (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 113.

18. See Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Basic, 1995).

19. See, for instance, Reu's defense of traditional Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, vicarious satisfaction, and the inspiration of Scripture, in "Unambiguous Clarification in Matters of the National Lutheran Council," in *Anthology of the Theological Writings of J. Michael Reu* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1997), 16. See also his critique of the theology of Nathan Söderblom in the same volume in the essay "Hallesby and Söderblom," 61–76.

20. Of course, many other great theologians could be named. I single out these two because of their work in social ethics. For the fruits of some of their work, see Christa R. Klein and Christian D. von Dehsen, *Politics and Policy: The Genesis and Theology of Social Statements in the Lutheran Church in America* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

21. See Mark Mattes, "Should Lutherans Be Mainline Protestants?" *Logia* 24/4 (2015): 29–40.

22. The language of "purification" is from Jonathan Haidt's TED Talk, "The Moral Roots of Liberals and Conservatives," <www.youtube.com/watch?v=vs41JrnGaxc> (this and subsequent sites accessed July 15, 2017). "Purification" conveys the fact that pro-life Democrats are marginalized in their party while the same is true of moderates in the Republican Party.

23. "Left-wing theological liberalism has built few, if any, great theological institutions. Left-wing theological liberalism as well as left-wing bureaucratic leadership has maintained itself by appropriating what far more traditional Christian believers have built and endowed." John Leith, *Crises in the Church: The Plight of Theological Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 34.

24. "The plethora of theologies now current in seminaries and in the life of the church leave ministers and church members with no clear sense of identity and no comprehensive framework of theology in the context of which they can understand the world and their own lives." Leith, 46.

25. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–1990: Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1992), 255.

26. Charles Austin, "Get Set for Clergy Retirement Wave," *The Lutheran* (October 22, 2014): 19–22.

27. Toward that end, see the Nexus Institute for Theology and Leadership in Ministry at Grand View University, <www.grandview.edu/aspx/audience/content.aspx?aid=0&pageid=2191>.

28. Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 131–40.

29. See *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

30. Thomas Reeves, *The Empty Church* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 67.